

Good afternoon Senator Flexer, Representative Hennessy, and the distinguished members of the Veterans' Affairs Committee.

Thank you for introducing and considering Proposed S.B. No.694 "An Act Concerning Services Available to Veterans on State College and University Campuses."

My name is Karen DeBari and I am currently the Veterans' Mentor who facilitates the operation of the Veterans' OASIS at Tunxis Community College in Farmington, CT. I am also an adjunct English professor at the college.

Our OASIS (Operation Academic Support for Incoming Service Members) is a place dedicated for military members and veterans of all ages on our campus utilizing their GI educational benefits. Our population consists mostly of younger vets recently returning from the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. All branches of the military come together to meet, socialize, study and learn about specific resources available to them. It is a place where the men and women with similar experiences support each other.

This semester we have over 200 student veterans registered on our campus and we expect that number to steadily increase over the next few years. Our veterans are an integral part of the college. They are involved in community service and fundraising endeavors that support other veterans. Our OASIS is a welcoming and safe outlet for our student service members. We offer coffee, light meal foods and snacks on an ongoing basis. It's amazing to me that any of our veterans should struggle with where their next meal is coming from. Unfortunately, almost every day I am helping someone figure out how to buy food, obtain transportation so they can come to campus for class or pay an electric bill because they fear they will once again become homeless and have to live at the VA housing in Rocky Hill.

We also plan social activities for our Veterans' Club which helps veterans return to civilian life in a healthy way. Our OASIS is not subsidized and all of our offerings are based on private donations that I procure through a grassroots fundraising effort. Our local community of donors has been extremely generous. In order to allow for donations our OASIS, through the Tunxis Foundation is now a 501c3.

Although I have no military experience, my parents are both veterans. I have been involved with the veterans and the OASIS since its inception in 2009. On a daily basis I am working with our veterans regarding academic, social, personal, financial, housing and employment issues. I am often the first point of contact for many of our veterans regarding mental health issues they are struggling with, the most prevalent being PTSD. I make referrals to outside agencies when needed.

I have learned that it takes time to earn their loyalty, respect and trust but if you speak with any of our vets they will tell you that what we have established at our OASIS is a new unit and a family. The relationships, support and services in our OASIS I believe can translate to any of our state colleges and universities given the model that we have established at Tunxis Community College and staffing it with the right people. Our veterans deserve access to support without mazes and roadblocks. We can assist them in a timely manner, in a comfortable, familiar setting when they are having difficulty accessing VA services.

Last November at our OASIS we hosted a roundtable discussion organized by Sen. Murphy and Sen. Blumenthal regarding mental health issues veterans face upon returning to civilian life. The veterans who spoke, talked of how the OASIS has been a lifeline to helping them reconnect in an environment where they are understood and accepted. Civilians who walk into our OASIS have commented on the safe, relaxing and caring environment that they witness. Our list of visitors to our Tunxis Veterans' OASIS is impressive. Gov. Malloy, Lt. Gov. Wyman, Sen. Blumenthal, Sen. Murphy, Rep. Esty, Atty. Gen. Jepsen, Sen. Bye, Rep. Demicco all have firsthand knowledge of our purpose and pledge to our veterans at Tunxis.

I ask that you please consider allowing S.B. No.694 to move forward and become a reality. It would be my honor to assist you in this vital endeavor. We need someone to mentor, advise and advocate for our veterans in every OASIS on every college campus.

Please feel free to contact me if you have any questions or would like more specifics regarding our day to day life in the OASIS. You are more than welcome to stop by our OASIS anytime to meet our student veterans and thank them for their service to our country. We can never repay them for their service, nor do they expect it, but our OASIS lets them know that we care about the sacrifices they've made for each one of us.

Sincerely,

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